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Intergalactic Blues: Fantasy and Ideology in *Avatar*

The Secret of Avatar

Avatar is the highest-grossing film of all time—in the U.S., in at least thirty-one other countries, worldwide, and, as far as we know, in the entire universe. Its huge production and promotional cost of nearly $500 million is dwarfed by gross receipts of nearly $3 billion. This exceeds the GNP of at least 77 countries. Let's face it. It's the most important film in history. However, this is not because of the money it's raked in. A number of cinematic nullities have pulled in a huge gross. It's not because of the plot, the acting, or the directing. All of these are miserable failures. And it's certainly not because of the supposedly progressive and ecologically enlightened message. That's all a complete fake.

Avatar is the most important film in history in one very precise sense. No film has ever revealed in such a spectacular way the functioning of ideology in cinema. *Avatar* is unsurpassed in the history of cinema in showing the ways in which ideology turns things into their precise opposite. Perhaps most important, it reveals with complete clarity the fact that no message, no matter how formally radical or revolutionary it might be, will have any salutary effect on the real world, if that message

is transmitted through the dominant media. It reveals the ultimate truth of mass media and of the cinematic spectacle. It reveals exactly what it means to be a spectator in mediatized society.

One of the primary rules of ideology critique is always to look for the purloined letter. Yes, "the truth is out there." And usually not that far out there. It pops up several times in relation to *Avatar*. For example, the director, James Cameron, slips up and explains exactly what his film is about, in completely non-ideological terms, in an interview shortly before it was released. He says, "We're telling the story of what happens when a technologically superior culture comes into a place with a technologically inferior indigenous culture and there are resources there that they want . . . . It never ends well."[1]

I suppose that it's not entirely astounding that the writer and director of a film might on some level actually know what his own film is really about. The astonishing thing is that almost everyone who sees the film thinks it's about exactly the opposite, and he does his best to make them think this. They think it's the story of how a very cool indigenous culture kicks the ass of a very nasty technologically advanced Empire, while a young American wins the very tall Blue Girl of his dreams. They think it's a story that ends *really well*. Unlike these viewers, Cameron seems, at least for a moment, to recognize the difference between the "real story" of *Avatar* and the superficially impressive but inanely idiotic supplementary narrative that pretends to subvert the real one, while in fact powerfully reinforcing it.

It's Really Special

We will take a very detailed look at the *real story* of *Avatar*. But first, let's consider the film's vaunted technical achievements and what we might call the "manifest story," that is, what almost everybody seems to think it's about: the plot. First, those really special effects. As one reviewer quipped, *Avatar*'s 3-D technology puts it "light-years ahead" of other films. Actually, *Avatar* is not only a considerable *cosmological distance* ahead of the others but even a whole *ontological dimension* ahead of the pack, since it appeared in some theaters in 4-D. The fourth dimension consists of elements that not only *seem* to be outside the screen, but *really are* outside it. Credit is usually given to John Waters

1. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/6720156/James-Cameron-interview-for-Avatar.html

for introducing 4-D with "Odorama" but this was only a new version of "Smell-O-Vision," which goes all the way back to 1960, the beginning of this cinematic New Frontier. The *idea* of the Fourth Dimension can be found at least as early as Buster Keaton's masterpiece, "Sherlock, Jr." (1924), in which Buster is depicted as going back and forth through a movie screen.

When *Avatar* first introduced 4-D in Korea, no Na'vi managed to fly their pterodactyloid aircraft through the movie screen into the theater, but dimension-bending techniques included moving seats, the smell of explosives, sprinkling water, wind, laser lights, plus twenty-five other special effects.[2] The cinematic world historical significance of 4-D is that it moves the techniques of imagineering beyond the limits of the screen into the more immediate environment of the viewers. It's a step in the direction of the totalizing of the imaginary experience, an increasing colonization or occupation of imaginary distance, the gap of fantasy. This could, on the one hand, work to subvert the powers of illusion, to the extent that ambient control distracts from the intensity of focus on the screen, the primary matrix of imaginary power. On the other hand, to the extent that it successfully reinforces the fantasy, it expands the empire of illusion, projecting it spatially outward toward the subject.

The ultimate *telos* of this movement from screen to subject will ironically result in a complete collapse of the process and effect a suspension of the distance traversed. In the end, images will be generated directly in the brains of what was once quaintly called "the viewers," or "the audience," in reference to the then obsolete forms of sensory transmission. In a sense, the audience will become on a certain level (What should we say, "a fleet"? No, that's not quite right. Let's say "a multitude.") *a multitude of drones*. Or, to put it in a more mystified and mythologized form, they will become *a multitude of avatars*.

Dreaming the Impossible Dream

In contrast to the futuristic nature of its special effects, *Avatar* is much more presentist, and, even backward looking and traditionalist, in the conceptualization and realization of its central narrative. The film begins with stereotypically "primitive" music and scenes of the primal forest.

2. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/lsquoavatarrsquo-in-4d-at-korean-theaters-1905267.html

We're thrown immediately in the world of romantic exoticism, soon to be contrasted with a dismal world of technological domination. We're transported 150 years in the future, long after Corporate Capitalism and the State have ravaged Planet Earth. We have entered the era in which corporations not only rule the world, or what's left of it, but are well on the way to ruling the universe. The story takes place in one particular corner of the universe, the moon Pandora, where the RDA Corporation has moved in to exploit a mineral of almost inestimable value called "Unobtainium." As Selfridge, the top corporate manager on Pandora says, "Their damn village is sitting right over the richest unobtanium deposit for a hundred klicks in any direction." The corporate rulers are not only dreaming the impossible dream, they are in the process of obtaining the unobtainable resource that will allow them to reap previously unreapable profits. And they don't have to go a single additional klick to do it.

While corporations have thoroughly trashed the earth, they seem to have survived global collapse in some unexplained manner, only to move on to new commanding heights. In the process, they have realized the hopes of Milton Friedman and the anarcho-capitalists and replaced national armies with powerful Private Defense Forces. We get to see what the State looks like when it's fully privatized, rather than being negated and abolished. RDA's Free Enterprise Army is ready, willing, and—let's face it—more than able to move in and overwhelm any resistance from the natives. We know what time it is. It's turkey-shoot time.

Next, we meet the Blue Turkeys. The natives are a tribal society consisting of Humanoids of Color called "the Na'vi." They are blue-skinned (a shade called "Na'vi Blue," we assume), ten feet tall, highly intelligent and physically powerful. They have a traditionalist, nature-worshiping, communal society that lives in complete balance with nature. They practice an animistic and pantheistic religion that centers around the worship of a great Mother Goddess, Eywa. Their planet, we are told, is a kind of Giant Brain in which there is "some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees." It is "a global network" with "more connections than the human brain." This is "All My Relations" updated. While real indigenous people have thought in terms of relationships of kinship and cycles of gift exchange, in *Avatar* the ultimate relations become technological and cybernetic ones, albeit in a primitivistically mystified form.

Signifying Monkeys

Unfortunately for the invading forces of free enterprise, Pandora is completely inhospitable to humans. Not only is it populated by hordes of ferocious creatures intent on killing and eating folks, the atmosphere is completely lethal to homo sapiens. The Corporation's primary solution to this problem is to engineer avatars, hybrid creatures containing a blend of Na'vi and human DNA. This allows the nervous systems of the human and his or her corresponding avatar to be "in tune." Though the avatar appears to be a normal Na'vi, it can be remote-controlled by the human who shares its DNA.

The protagonist, Jake Sully, has come to Pandora to take over his murdered twin brother's avatar (since only someone with identical DNA can do this.). Jake is a former Marine who lost use of his legs in military action. His superior, Dr. Grace Augustine, has little confidence in him and consigns him, or on the physical level, his avatar, to guard duty. So it's time to hook him up to his avatar. As soon as this is done, Jake immediate freaks out, crashing into everything in the lab before escaping and going temporarily AWOL as he cavorts through the Pandoran countryside. There is a ridiculous gap between the real Jake's personality and that of his avatar. Jake is chastened by tragedy and to a certain degree reflective. His avatar turns out to be a charmingly stupid, somewhat gonzoid cartoon hero. This might seem strange, since nothing about either the human genes or the Na'vi ones would fully explain this. However, it soon becomes evident that all the Na'vi characters have a good dose of Disney DNA also, and these genes seem to be particularly dominant in the avatar called "Jakesully."

After calming down, Jake's avatar joins a mission in the Pandoran forest. He gets separated from the others and is nearly devoured immediately by the terrifying local fauna, before being miraculously saved by the Na'vi princess Neytiri, who happens to be in the neighborhood and wipes out the scary creatures. Despite all the technological sophistication of the Corporation, Jake seems to have almost no training for survival on Pandora. It's amazing that he lasted even long enough for the Magic Princess to save him. Neytiri notices immediately how difficult it is to convey anything about Pandora to thickheaded Sky People like Jake. Mo'at, the female shaman, agrees. Showing the trans-planetary nature of clichés, she remarks, "It is hard to fill a cup which is already full." However, this lovable idiot begins to grow

on Neytiri. She takes him to the communal dwelling place, an enormous thousand-foot high tree, which is appropriately called "Home Tree." Despite widespread suspicion about the aliens and their avatars, the Na'vi decide to allow Jake to stay and to teach him about the culture.

At this point in the story, we come to one of the things the audience would be most curious about: What is a Na'vi drug trip like? As part of his education, Jake's avatar gets to have a vision. Mo'at purifies his body with holy smoke, and then takes "a glowing purple WORM" from some rotten old wood and deposits it in Jake's mouth for him to chew. Immediately, those around him "seem to TRANSFORM, becoming threatening," and "SPACE is utterly distorted, and SOUND as well—echoing, THUNDEROUS." He sees "a ring of glowing trees, which seem miles high," and everything is "bathed in spectral radiance." There's more, but you get the point. It all ends with a vision of "a diving LEONOPTERYX," a huge ferocious creature, bearing down on him. However, you have to check the script to find all this out, because the audience gets to see none of it. Apparently, it was judged to be too dangerous. In fact, the whole movie is about, and in a sense is, a drug experience. It's all about escapism through spacing out, but none of this can be expressed too explicitly. So the audience is robbed of this particular cheap thrill. We move on.

Winning (Or Else Wasting) Hearts and Minds

Meanwhile, back at the space colony, Jake catches up on the Corporation's strategy on Pandora. As he summarizes it: "That's how it's done. When people are sitting on shit you want, you make them your enemy. Then you're justified in taking it." However, the Corporation and its army, presumably after reading ancient military manuals from Vietnam and Afghanistan, has adopted the tactic of trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the natives before massacring them. However, to their surprise (no ancient history books having survived) this has been a complete failure and relations have deteriorated. So, while bribing the Na'vi into compliance would be the Corporation's preferred, most cost-effective tactic, the military is fully prepared to annihilate what they see as backward Blue Gooks, should this be necessary. As Selfridge puts it, "killing the indigenous looks bad, but there's one thing shareholders hate more than bad press—and that's a bad quarterly statement. Find me a carrot to get them to move, or it's going to have to be all stick."

Jake's avatar has been accepted into Na'vidom, so this infiltrating avatar is the last hope for arranging a non-genocidal, non-stick solution to the problem of getting the goods. Selfridge tells Jake what his mission is: "Look, Sully—find out what these blue monkeys want." Col. Miles Quaritch adds that Jake will "get his legs back," courtesy of the Corporation, if he succeeds in betraying his new Na'vi friends. We can feel at home in this future world. Big Brother still pours huge investments into top-priority military hardware, while at the same time strictly rationing non-essential medical treatment that could merely make someone's life worthwhile.

Jake continues his mission among the Na'vi, but is increasingly won over by the natives. They decide that his education has progressed to the point that he can be officially adopted into the tribe. Now a full-fledged Hometreeboy, he aids his newfound bluepeeps in resisting an attack by the Corporation's army. Beginning to emerge as a budding tribal hero, he single-handedly disables one of the Corporation's huge military vehicles. As a rookie tribesman, Jake gets the rather individualist, patriarchal right to choose a mate, but in an act of primitivistic political correctness, Jake and Nevtiri end up choosing one another. Thus, they incidentally introduce romantic love into this communal tribal society, no doubt flouting tradition and the wisdom of the ancestors.

Monkey Business

Jakesully and Neytiri then consummate their union. The Na'vi may forgive the blue Romeo and Juliette for sacrilege or whatever, but it's hard to imagine that the audience will forgive the director for depriving them of the one thing they were most curious about: How do the Na'vi do it? Tragically, we get no idea what Blue Monkey Sex is really like. All we see is totally romanticized fore-foreplay and voilà, the lovers are peacefully interwined, snoozing blissfully on the forest floor.

It goes quite otherwise in the unexpurgated script. Neytiri remarks, in a surprising move of tribal coquetterie, "Kissing is very good. But we have something better." Next, "she takes the end of her queue and raises it." Wanna queue? What do you think! "Jake does the same, with trembling anticipation. The tendrils at the ends move with a life of their own, straining to be joined." Ah, Ah! Autonomous part-objects! Extraterrestrial desiring machines! "MACRO SHOT—The

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tendrils INTERTWINE with gentle undulations." Ah! Ah! You earthlings can hardly imagine! "JAKE rocks with the direct contact between his nervous system and hers." Total contact! The sexual body without organs! "The ultimate intimacy." Ah! Ah! Ahvatar! Of course, "the night" is itself "alive with pulsing energy as we DISSOLVE TO—LATER. She is collapsed across his chest. Spent. He strokes her face tenderly." Ah! Ah! Of course, we miss all of this, except a somewhat inexplicable afterglow, in the film.

The closest we come to getting an answer in the film itself to "How do the Na'vi do it?" is that they do it with their horses. Though the horses are really more like flying prehistoric monsters. Neytiri introduces Jake to "mounting" and "becoming one with" the creature. As the screenplay relates the consummation of this extraordinary act of interspecies intercourse:

> *JAKE nervously grips the surcingle of the mare. Neytiri holds its nose-ring while Jake clumsily mounts. Jake bends one of its ANTENNAE down to the tip of his queue. He hesitantly touches them together and -- -- the tendrils INTERWEAVE. Jake's PUPILS DILATE and his mouth drops open. The horse's eyes also go wide and it HONKS nervously. Neytiri touches her fingertips to the neural interface." Neytiri says "This is shahaylu -- the bond. Feel her heartbeat, her breath. Feel her strong legs." Jake closes his eyes, nodding. One with the horse.*[3]

Is there any doubt about what's going on? Strangely, our director seems to be afraid to depict Jake and Neytiri queuing, but he doesn't hesitate to show Jake queuing his horse.

Meanwhile, back in civilization, Quarritch soon finds Jake's video diary, in which that dumbass troop stupidly reveals all his traitorous thoughts like some idiotic teenager putting videos of his drunken malfeasances on YouTube. The Corporation decides to attack the Na'vi, bomb HomeTree into oblivion, and grab the Unobtanium. Jake and Dr. Grace are given an hour for a final attempt to reach an agreement with

3 The text of the screenplay can be found at http://www.wattpad.com/281148-avatar-movie-script-2007 and other sites.

the Na'vi, after which Shock and Awe will be unleashed. Jake and Grace's plea for reasonable compromise with genocidal imperialism fails. When their erstwhile tribal friends discover their role as emissaries for the Corporation, they accuse them of being spies (that is, precisely what they have been) and take them prisoner. The attack commences, fire and brimstone rain down, and in the holocaust HomeTree is immolated along with many of the Na'vi. Back at the military-industrial complex, Jake and Dr. Grace are disconnected from their captured avatars and thrown in the brig. One of their allies, a wise Latina, releases them, but Dr. Grace is seriously wounded during the escape. She later dies among the Na'vi.

In a major turning point in the narrative, Jake's avatar gets loose and proves himself by taming the Great Leonopteryx, alias Toruk, a monstrous flying creature that has only been subdued five time in the entire history of the Na'vi. Thus, Jake's avatar, the former bumbling blue idiot, becomes the Superhero of Na'vidom and the leader of hordes of warriors from other clans, who begin arriving in burgeoning numbers. The Corporation launches an overwhelming and seemingly irresistible attack, using all the firepower the martial imagination can muster. However, just as Shock and Awe seems on the verge of winning, Jake's avatar manages to blow up Quaritch's gigantic aircraft and rampaging hordes of giant prehistoricoid creatures stampede and decimate the advancing army. Victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat by the jaws of prehistoric monsters and by what looks pretty much like good old American Ingenuity and True Grit on the part of Jake's avatar. Quaritch survives the battle and almost ruins the fun by cutting off Jake's oxygen, but Neytiri saves the day by skewering the Colonel and rescuing Jake at the last possible moment. *Blugrrl power rules!*

The epic concludes with all but a few of the hopelessly unregenerate humans parading back to their spacecraft, defeated and dejected, ready to return to their ruined world (presumably until "Pandora Syndrome" wears off and they find another planet with Unobtainium, or maybe just Difficulttoobtainium, to plunder). The Na'vi perform a ritual in which Jake's spirit transmigrates completely into his now super-heroic avatar body. As we will see, this signifies that the Apotheosis of the Drone is complete.

Theory I: Like Wow!

But not everyone sees it this way. There have been a wide range of interpretations of *Avatar* that go in various directions, though most take it as a given that the central theme is the triumph of noble savagery and the beneficent forces of nature over a corrupt, greedy and generally iniquitous civilization. For example, Ido Hartogsohn in "Avatar: The Psychedelic Worldview and the 3D Experience"[4] interprets Avatar as a kind of New Age Revelation. He says that "it is as anti-civilizational and anti-technological as a John Zerzan book, psychedelic like a Terrence McKenna talk, and glorifies the indigenous and shamanic world view. The fact that some people have failed to appreciate these highly explicit traits in *Avatar*, and call it clichéd or hackneyed is, to my mind, largely based on blindness to Avatar's role as a mythic specimen of our culture." Terrance is long gone, but I'd like to check with John on this. But, OK, let's admit it. It's a mythic specimen of our culture. The question is: "A specimen of what?"

How neo-primitivist is it? Hartogsohn cites examples of plot elements that are taken from authentic tribal cultures and concludes that these show that "the Avatar story is as anti-civilizational and neo-primitivist as it gets." He admits that it is "a highly ambivalent and even paradoxical film. It uses the most advanced technology to go on a long harangue against technology. But it has the maybe naïve hope that our pod experience, like Jake's, will make us want to leave our pods and reconnect with our bodies." Yeah, sure. As they say, "hopefully…" But in reality there's little (read: no) chance that such a film can have that effect, especially since the solution to Jake's problem is not *reconnecting* with his own body, or coming to terms with its limitations, as actual living earthlings might have to do, but rather it is *casting it off* in favor of a technologically engineered one. Of course, if you believe in New Age magic merged with cybernetics, you can hope that the technobody will eventually morph into a real person rather than remaining a techno-nobody. But nobody in their right mind can really believe that.

It's not surprising that Avatar should go over well in Lalaland, since it's so full of New Age fakery. For example, Jake observes that the whole planet is a vast system of energy that the Na'vi can plug into—sometimes literally. It sounds really far out, like those holistic, personally empowering, non-polluting electric cars (all you do is plug them into the

4. ttp://www.realitysandwich.com/avatar_psychedelic_worldview_3d

grid at night). "They see a network of energy that flows through all living things. They know that all energy is only borrowed." Yet there is no evidence that the Na'vi have to pay back all the energy they drain from the system. True, they die, but this just gives back a small amount of the total energy they use. Therefore, this is just ideology—they actually use a surplus of energy, draining it continually from the system, but they claim that they are only borrowing it and will pay it back. The Na'vi are not far from the kind of self-deception that is endemic in some Green and most New Age circles. The Na'vi are, in fact, a mythologized embodiment of precisely such false consciousness.

Hartogsohn, however, thinks that it is "no less than amazing" that such a revolutionary film, "with its psychedelic qualities and ideas, shamanic values, and indigenous politics," and which "challenges all that is sacred to western materialistic thought and champions shamanic ideas and values deemed to be ludicrous by the dominator culture" has "already earned more than a billion dollars and is quite probably on its way to becoming the highest grossing film of all time." Right. Show me the money. The New Age Revolution is over and the primitive has won, all on the basis of box-office receipts.

A hard act to follow, this powerful assault on Western civilization. What could possibly come next? Hartogsohn tells us exactly. After the Revolution comes the Renaissance. "Considering that the next big 3D event is Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, a story jammed with weird acting mushrooms and even weirder realities, it seems that we might be facing a kind of psychedelic renaissance brought on by 3D cinema." In other words, after a "fundamental challenge" to the "reigning values" of the "dominator culture," we don't do something mundane like starting an actual, real-world revolution to put the new values into effect. No, we move on to *Alice in Wonderland*.

Theory II: Objet Petit @

Please, let's move on. More interestingly, Layla AbdelRahim gives us the critical anarcho-primitivist interpretation of *Avatar*.[5] Like most commentators, she focuses primarily on the manifest content of the plot.

5. Layla AbdelRahim, "Avatar: An Anarcho-Primitivist Picture of the History of the World" at http://layla.miltsov.org/avatar-an-anarcho-primitivist-picture-of-the-history-of-the-world/

In her view, "the film is primarily about the two clashing world-views at the core of the relationship between the civilized and the wild" and "Jake represents the conscience of the civilized awakened by his ability to finally learn." And, of course, this is exactly what we see in the surface narrative. It's a morality tale in which bad civilization is juxtaposed to good primitivism, with Jake as the mediating term. In a sense, he's like the Ursula LeGuin figures (in *The Dispossessed*, *Always Coming Home*, etc.) who are able to live in two worlds and reveal something about each that the inhabitants of each don't see.[6] However, in Jake's case, he doesn't *truly* mediate. In fact, there is never really any mediation possible between the corrupt, evil society and the good community. So LeGuin's mediators really mediate between us, those capable of deliverance from the corrupt, evil world, and the imagined good society, which is really a representation of the liberatory moments of our own human history. Jake is utterly incapable of doing this, because of the fraudulent nature of the "good" alternative offered in *Avatar*.

In the end, the utter impossibility of his work of mediation is symbolized by the disappearance of his human body, his direct connection to one of his worlds. He's a partially vanishing mediator. Jake *qua* Jake disappears. There's just no hope for the human, all too human. Everything in the end is A (for Avatar) OK. But one must wonder whether the remaining human DNA in Jake's avatar would not come back to haunt the Na'vi. Of course, this is a sequel that will never be produced. We are to fantasize Jake's avatar as in the end a Na'vi "without remainder," though we know that there is, as always, a remainder. But AbdelRahim still entertains the possibility that Jake/avatar Jake could function as a successful mediating term.

To support the anarcho-primitivism thesis, AbdelRahim points out that Jake "does not come there as a leader, but as someone responsible for the disclosure of vital information about the enemy." There are several problems, though, with this claim. First, he comes as a spy, and secondly, he is fully ready to become a leader, and he in fact ends up doing so in a big way. He proves that a hybrid with just enough Gringo genes can do what none of the living Na'vi are capable of doing, for good or evil. AbdelRahim contends that the message of the film is that "if life is to survive against the machine, it is vital to respond as brutally as the invader attacks in order to stop the disease. Resistance is going to

6. For a brilliant discussion of the importance of outsiderism, see Andrei Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside* (Addison-Wesley, 1990

cost lives, but it is necessary, if one wants to save the balance of life." The problem is that if this is really the message of the film, it is a message that goes nowhere with the vast majority of the audience, and could hardly be expected to have any real effect. It's an undeliverable message, and what kind of message is that? It's at best a nominal message rather than a real one. And, in fact, it's the antithesis of the real one of the film.

AbdelRahim ultimately recognizes this, and for this reason, her interpretation is far superior to most of the Romantic primitivist views of Avatar. In the end, she fully acknowledges fatal "problems with this anarcho-primitivist work of art." She might have said that the big one is that it's neither "anarcho-primitivist" nor a "work of art." Instead, she notes that "it is based on the symbolic representation relying on the use of the same materials that are at the basis of our alienation from the world," and that the medium assumes "the overt acknowledgment of the 'fakeness' of the experience," and thus cannot "convince us of truth." She points out that "Cameron uses the same machines, technologies and money that devastate the wilderness he tells us we need to save," and that what the audience comes for is not revolutionary propaganda, but "entertainment and a 3-dimensional experience of violence and sci-fi." So, we might add that far from "convincing us of truth," *Avatar* indeed *perpetuates lies*. The lies are embedded in the structure of the corporate capitalist film industry, in the cinematic process, and, far more than AbdelRahim concedes, even in the dramatic structure of the film itself, as we shall see..

Theory III: What Do You Mean "We," Paleface?

Right-wing columnist David Brooks picks up on one of the central structural flaws of *Avatar* in his article "The Messiah Complex"[7] However, Brooks has to get this year's, if not this decade's "Bad Faith in Film Criticism" award for writing the most blatantly hypocritical review of a film. According to Brooks, the great sin of *Avatar* is that it espouses what he calls the "White Messiah Fable." According to his account, the White Messiah Fable is "the oft-repeated story about a manly young adventurer who goes into the wilderness in search of thrills and profit. But, once there, he meets the native people and finds that they are noble and spiritual and pure. And so he emerges as their Messiah,

7. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html

leading them on a righteous crusade against his own rotten civilization. Audiences like it because it is so environmentally sensitive. Academy Award voters like it because it is so multiculturally aware. Critics like it because the formula inevitably involves the loincloth-clad good guys sticking it to the military-industrial complex." Brooks, as a good right-wing philistine, dislikes it for all the same reasons he thinks that the various idiots in the audience like it.

The irony of Brooks' criticism is that he attacks precisely the same evil ideology that he spends his entire life promoting. The problem he has with the film is that the White Messiah is named "Jake" and the pure people are called the "Na'vi." If the White Messiah were called "USA" or some representative thereof, and the saved were called "Iraq," "Afghanistan," or "Fillintheblankistan," there would be no problem. No one like Brooks is truly opposed to the White Messiah fable. It's just that believers don't call something "a fable" when they believe in it. What Brooks can't stand is seeing a perversion of the very mythology that is most dear to him. When he lists egregious examples of cinematic White Messiahism, he fails to register a single complaint against any Honky Hero who ventures out into the world of primitive barbarism to protect outposts of Western Civilization or to save the benighted primitive barbarians from themselves. It's only the Palefaced Paladins who defect to the enemy that get on Brooks's nerves. As late as 2008, Rambo could a still "venture into war-torn Burma, and rescue a group of Christian aid workers who were kidnapped by the ruthless local infantry unit"[8] carrying on the noble White Messianic tradition by personally killing 238 bad guys of color. But you won't hear a word of complaint from our Mr. Brooks.

Brooks' strategy requires him at once to vastly oversimplify the White Messiah theme and to exaggerate greatly its significance. The result necessitates a kind of pose of enlightened stupidity. His right-wing sensibilities are offended even by even this vapid form of anti-imperialist nonsense, so he must attempt to justify his defensive reaction in the guise of anti-racism. However, this obliges him to get almost everything about the film wrong. For example, he thinks that its plot "rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic." But this isn't true. The film depicts imperialists (not just "white people") as *extremely irrational* and technocratic, that is, more or less the way imperialists really

8. Internet Movie Data Base.

are. He also claims that such a narrative "creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration." This is also an opportunistic distortion. It's true that Cameron in some ways perpetuates a repugnant and ridiculous racist stereotype. But in the end, despite the exaggerated heroics of Jake's avatar, he does not single-handedly "shape the history" of the Na'vi. Their victory is determined also by the resistance of the Na'vi themselves and by the "revenge of nature"—the latter in ways that have nothing at all to do with anything Jake does. And finally, the problem isn't that the story is secretly all about "self-admiration." In reality, the viewer can wallow in admiration for the primitive, while at the same time indulging in quite a bit of civilizational self-hatred. The problem is that all of this wallowing and indulging are made quite safe and non-threating, and take place fully within the context of the most conformist advanced technological consumerism.

Theory IV: The Function of the Fantasm

Not surprisingly, the always-incisive Slavoj Zizek goes much further than most other reviewers in revealing what the film is really about. In "Return of the natives,"[9] Zizek confronts directly the big issue in the film—the dialectic of fantasy and reality, both within the film, and in the relation between world of the film and the larger world. Of course, he unveils the film's naïve fantasy strategy, but he warns that the point is not that we "should reject *Avatar* on behalf of a more 'authentic' acceptance of the real world." He explains that rather "if we really want to change or escape our social reality, the first thing to do is change our fantasies that make us fit this reality." Which is, in fact, exactly the issue. *Avatar* reinforces these fantasies just as it creates the illusion of undermining them. But Zizek takes this in another direction. He says that because Jake is unable to change his fantasies, "his subjective position is what Jacques Lacan, with regard to de Sade, called *le dupe de son fantasme*," that is, the dupe of his fantasy, the victim of his own imagination. So, Zizek concludes, "the end of the film should be read as the hero fully migrating from reality into the fantasy world."

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9. http://www.newstatesman.com/print/201003040015

This criticism has much validity, on a certain level. The brutal world of the Corporation is "the real" relative to the cartoonish fantasy world of the Na'vi. So Jake's migration is in a sense equivalent to a tactic of escaping from the real world by being fully incorporated into the physical, cultural and spiritual world of Sponge Bob or The Smurfs. However, the imperialist world is, on several levels, a fantasy world also, so in a sense Jake migrates from a "real" fantasy world (one closer to the dominant fantasy) to a more fantastic, higher-order fantasy world. In fact, we could interpret the whole plot after the opening scene as Jake's fantasy of overcoming his handicapped body and escaping from the world that caused his disaster. We can see one tragic narrative strand in *Avatar* as the story of a damaged subject who wants to secede from the hegemonic culture that mutilated him, but who doesn't know how to do so in any realistic way, and who thus seeks refuge in a ridiculous fantasy. If we follow this course of reasoning, we might say that Jake, fictional though he may be, can only achieve his goal vicariously, through us. Through our own temporary insanity of successful identification with a ridiculous cartoon, we allow the non-existent Jake to solve his existential problem.

The Big Monkey Does Not Exist

On the other hand, we can also see *Avatar* as the representation of the collective fantasy of the audience who find their world to be actually turning into the dystopian planet earth of the film. Zizek suggests that we might "imagine a sequel to Avatar in which, after a couple of years (or, rather, months) of bliss, the hero starts to feel a weird discontent and to miss the corrupted human universe." As I suggested earlier, something like this might be the kind of thing that would happen when Jakesully's human DNA kicks in. This is exactly what happens in the classic case of the brilliant ending of *Blue Velvet*, in which just as the triumphant protagonist Jeffrey begins to sit back and enjoy the American Dream, the creepy unreality of the putatively real world emerges. There is a return of the sublimely menacing repressed underside of that truly nightmarish world that masquerades as everyday ordinary reality. Using the imagery of the film, we might say that "the poison is in him"—the poison of the real and the poison of a subversive imaginary, represented by the hauntingly attractive character, Dorothy Vallens.

Avatar's audience must experience something like this on an unconscious level to the degree that they are not complete idiots and recognize the world of the Na'vi as fake and contrived. The Big Blue Monkey does not exist. As Jake says, fatefully, at the beginning of *Avatar*, in a powerful immanent critique of the film's entire flimsy fantasy structure, "sooner or later though, you always have to wake up." The problem is that *Avatar* allows the audience members to wake up from the dream into the nightmare, but far from helping them wake up from the nightmare, it actually prevents them from doing so. They must on some level of consciousness know that as the sullen earthlings file back on to their spacecraft for the trip back to a devastated McEarth, that this is really the audience filing out of the movie theater into the real world of late capitalism.

Zizek also calls Cameron on his rather brain-dead adherence to "the Hollywood formula for producing a couple," which he pushes to the point of "staging great historical events as the background to the formation of a couple" (for which he takes *Reds*, rightly, as the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*). Like Brooks, though from a politically and philosophically opposite perspective, he stresses the centrality the White Messiah theme. He points out that the plot gives the indigenous people no choice other than "either to be the victim of imperialist reality, or to play their allotted role in the white man's fantasy." Which is, as in the case of Brooks's reactionary interpretation, partially true, but not entirely adequate. To the extent that the narrative is seen as Jake's escape from the impasse of his disability through an elaborate fantasy, everything about the Na'vi, the Corpoartion and the epochal battle between good and evil merely plays a role in his fantasy.

However, the dialectic of the imaginary is more complex than this. On another level, Jake is captured by the fantasy-world of the Na'vi, and transformed by them, even to the point of fully becoming (even if not, of course, "fully becoming") a Na'vi. Furthermore, there is a moment in which Jake's heroic role results from his negation of his "whiteness" and his allowing the tribe and the forces of nature to work through him. This is the moment that allows many viewers to be taken in by the primitivism and anti-civilizationism of the film. The problem is not that this moment does not exist, that it's "White Messiah" all the way down, but that this moment is in the end a complete failure aesthetically, dramatically, psychologically, morally and politically. The problem is that the audience is ultimately "the victim of imperialist reality," and

its fantasy can be trusted "to play its allotted role" in legitimating that reality, and in helping that reality adapt itself successfully to a new world of environmental concern and cultural sensitivity. This shows the degree to which Marcuse's concept of "repressive desublimation" in late capitalism still has validity. *Avatar* is the most advanced expression of the project called "commodify your dissent."

Doing Without Doing

What would "Avatar activism," mean, if the film were really capable of being a catalyst for such a thing? There are no lack of opportunities for it, and they are not thousands of klicks away, but well within the boundaries of the Milky Way. To take one example, for forty years the tribal people of West Papua have been fighting against ecological devastation and cultural genocide by the Freeport McMoRan Corporation and its ally the Indonesian state. And, as Zizek mentions, the Naxalite rebellion, which consists in large part of the resistance of indigenous people to exploitation by mining companies, was spreading through the forests of India just as *Avatar* was racking up three billion dollars in receipts by exploiting the theme of indigenous resistance as its central plot element (mining it for all it's worth, we might say). How many *Avatar* viewers have been inspired to come to aid of the Papuans? How many have gone to fight in the forest with the Naxalites? Has the film been a major motivation for even a single person to do anything like this? This is highly unlikely, for it is effective only in offering an imaginary substitute for any such action. The fantasies that it generates offer the audience opportunities for consumption of profit-generating, post-modernist, pseudo-subversive images. It remains light-years away from inspiring the production of any disruptive, so-19th-Century revolutionary acts.

Zizek points out the fateful problem of being *unable* to change ones fantasy. And there is, indeed, a tenacity and incorrigibility of the fundamental fantasy or, more accurately, the constellation of related fantasies that constitute the dominant imaginary. The consequences of this incapacity are, as he indicates, often disastrous. But one of the most striking things about our late capitalist consumer culture is the range of opportunities that it offers to consumers and spectators precisely to *change* their fantasies in certain ways. While being entranced by the 3-D and 4-D special effects, and awed by the power of CGI, the audience

can enter superficially and momentarily into an anarcho-primitivist fantasy, yet at the same time it will have no difficulty holding on to its technological utopian dream-world and other basic fantasies that are evoked, reinforced and gratified in a multitude of ways in everyday life. The primitivist fantasy, though it may be evoked again periodically, is incapable of challenging even minimally the normal productionist and consumptionist fantasies, the fantasies of the machine and the spectacle, that dominate ordinary experience. Any intense gratification of the primitivist fantasy will, of course, have residual effects. These can be expressed in activities such as recycling, buying green products, and viewing sequels to *Avatar*. And, in fact, there is an *Avatar* web site designed precisely to satisfy the urge to engage in such activities.

Avatars for Social Responsibility! Pandorans Without Borders!

One cannot claim that no social or ecological action has resulted from the film. If one goes to the *Avatar* web site, one will discover that Cameron has set up an activist project called "The Home Tree Initiative," with the professed goal of helping to save Homeplanet.[10] Contrary to the name, it's not an effort to create primitivist ecological communities inspired by the "Home Tree" of the Na'vi, much less any initiatives in eco-defense modeled after their resistance to the Intergalactic Capitalist Conspiracy. In reality, the initiative is just another tree-planting project. The two most non-transformative, non-threatening and eminently doable eco-gestures are recycling and tree planting, and since the movie features forests rather than sanitary landfills, the choice was obvious. As Cameron and producer Jon Landau tell us in a video on the website, they set a goal of planting one million trees in 2010. As they explain, "the time has come to stand up and be warriors for the earth." As it turns out, you can become an eco-warrior and fight the good, green fight without going through all the trouble of actually standing up.

One might quite reasonably wonder how planting trees qualifies one to be "a warrior for the earth." But this would miss the point. The "Home Tree Initiative" doesn't actually require the brave eco-warriors to plant even a single tree. In fact, they don't even have to contribute a single cent for anyone else to plant one. We are told that "20th Century Fox has

10. http://www.avatarmovie.com/hometree/

partnered with The Earth Day Network to plant 1 million trees." Such major actors, along with cooperating nation-states, will take care of the planting. At ease, eco-troops. All you have to do is enlist for a little basic training of the imagination. The Path of the Eco-Warrior consists merely in signing up to "adopt a tree." That's it. You just *imagine* that it's adopted and voilà, you're on the warpath. The idea is that a million eco-warriors willing to endure the perils of imaginary tree adoption will be recruited. Just consider what a million people who imagine that they have adopted a tree are capable of doing. Or not actually doing. Unfortunately, in spite of such less than heroic effort required to qualify as a "warrior for the earth," the Eco-Salvation Army remains badly understaffed. As of the end of the year, the Home Tree website reported that only 290,000 warriors/adoptive tree parents have reported for (non-)duty, while the other 710,000 remain AWOL. Perhaps the rest just imagined that they signed up.

For those *Avatar* fans who just aren't all that much into trees, the site offers more traditional online attractions. For example, if you're turned on by a different shade of green, you can enter the "Ultimate Avatar Sweepstakes" and win $50,000. Of course, I signed up immediately, hoping that I could be the kind of warrior who wins $50,000—by fighting against the odds, I suppose. I haven't won so far, but my new online friend, "Fox" urges me to continue to soldier on by "visiting www.avatarsweeps.com daily for more chances to win $50,000 and other instant-win prizes." Trying to be a good soldier and obey orders, I have continued to check the site. However, I've found that at a certain point you begin to feel less like an well-armed warrior and more like an unarmed target. For example, if you don't bother to uncheck a box, you are automatically"signed up to receive special announcements, updates and more from Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment." And you're told in the fine print that if you decide to adopt a tree (which will, of course, be planted whether you adopt it or not), you make an agreement to be bombarded with advertising for precisely the kind of consumerist junk that keeps the voracious ecocidal tree-eating Megamachine humming. And be warned: "By filling out and submitting this registration form I understand and agree that Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment may send me information about upcoming products, promotions and services and may use information about my activities on Fox web sites to determine what products, promotions and services are likely to be of interest to me." Until they can plant something

directly in your brain that determines what your interests are, they need a little bit of cooperation on your part to effectively track and check up on you.

I Find My Own Personal Avatar

In addition, the website gives you the opportunity to play various eco-oriented games and get "badges." And best of all, you can actually "*become an Avatar*." I skipped the games, since I already had the thrill of winning badges long ago at summer camp, but never have I had the chance to become an actual avatar. I decided to become an avatar. Little did I suspect the mortal dangers of aspiring avatarhood. Two of my avatars were abruptly murdered somewhere in cyberspace because I had forgotten to "allow" the "popups" that are necessary for avatars fully to complete their gestation process. My abruptly aborted avatars even had pictures and their own personal Na'vi names before they were tragically short-circuited, shortly after the moment of cyber-conception. Let's hope that they are somewhere in avatar heaven with Eywa, or out happily planting trees in some deforested alternative universe. On the third try, I finally got my avatar, based on the "Cafardigras" 2006 Max Cafard Mardi Gras photo that I submitted.

The coincidence is amazing. My avatar is called Chok'tah. This name bears an uncanny similarity to the name of one of our local tribal groups, the Wild Chok'tah'toulas. Much as on Pandora, the tribal people here worship and dance around a Tree of Life. They even have a queen, called Sis'si Na'vi in one of the tribal dialects. And the nights are always alive with Spirits and Light. My avatar should feel right at home here. It's Pandora with Lagniappe. Chok-tah-mo-fee-nah-nay!

After all this harmless fun and consumerism, I was delighted to see that there was also a "take action now" link on the website. Finally, something for those who suspected that playing *Avatar*-related games or pretend-adopting a tree might not be the most effective means possible of fighting the Empire and saving Homeplanet. Finally, I would be put in touch with organizations and movements working to smash the State, Capitalism, and the Megamachine, just like our Na'vi role models did. Unfortunately, the link only led to a "page not found" message. So close to liberation, yet so far away.

What's It All About?

Which leads us back to our main point: why *Avatar* is the most important film in history. *Avatar* is the ultimate argument against having any faith in the dominant mass media as a means of inspiring opposition to the global system of domination. *Avatar*'s explicit message is that civilization is oppressive and destructive and that we should break with it, smash its power, and go to live in egalitarian, ecological communities instead. And it uses the most sophisticated CGI's in history to bombard the audience with this message. If one believes in the power of mass media, and who cannot today, one would expect its impact to be, on some level, quite enormous. It is not only scathing in its condemnation of imperialism in general, but quite specifically attacks the very rationales and strategies that have been used to instigate and carry out the war in Iraq and other recent conflicts. It's heavy-handed to the point of being transparently manipulative in depicting the devastation inflicted on tribal societies by imperialism, and specifically capitalist, profit-driven imperialism. Yet the film's ability to inspire any active opposition to war and imperialism is nil. In fact, never in the history of this world, or probably any other one, has any anti-war propaganda been so practically ineffectual.

However, this is not surprising, once we penetrate beneath the surface level of narrative and look at the various levels of meaning conveyed by the film. If we were to express it in Lacanian terms, we might say the following. On the imaginary level, there's an affirmation of the primitive, the wild, nature, the tribal, and the communal. Anarcho-primitivism. The *objet petit @*. Yet there is a contradiction here, because it is obvious that the director is entranced with technology, and he communicates this to the viewer powerfully on the imaginary level in the impressive military technology, the avatar/drone technology, and the mystified technology of the great primeval cybernetic forest. On the symbolic level, there are all sorts of contradictions. On the one hand, there is an affirmation of the civilized male hero (alias the White Messiah), his successful oedipal rebellion, and the phallic forces of technology and self-assertive force. But there is also an endorsement of excessive oedipal rebellion and an alliance with the mother (in the symbolic form of the pre-patriarchal feminine divinity) and against paternal power. On the level of the real (and this is where the real force of the film lies), there is an affirmation of the inexorable course of technological domination.

This structure of meaning can also be expressed in other, more explicitly politicized terms. We might also say that on the level of consumptionist imaginary, there is a gratification of the widespread fascination with nature, the wild, the primitive, the tribal. In this way, the consumptionist ego is gratified. On the level of the productionist imaginary, there is an appeal to the technological power and the strong male figure, the actor/creator. There's an irony here, since there is an explicit critique of technological and productionist ideology, at the same time that the technological and productionist imaginary are affirmed. On the level of the social reality underlying the imaginary and ideology, there is an affirmation of the course of the system of domination. The blue people are obviously living in fairytale land, a world that has no real connection to planet earth. The white male hero and his blue hybrid avatar/drone also inhabit an alien world, the world of cinematic myth that is alien to any conceivable real–world action. The one thing that seems overpoweringly real in this film is the machinery. It's entirely plausible that something quite like it will be around in the relatively near future. The film presents a realistic extrapolation of what is now taking place. Even the avatar, the eponymous hero of the film, is an extrapolation of the prosthetic bodies that are now evolving and, most significantly, of the drone technology that is becoming so central to global domination.

The Apotheosis of the Drone

And this points to one of the most profound levels of meaning in *Avatar*. In a multitude of ways, it reinforces the ideology of technological domination that it seemingly questions. For example, it acts as ideology by perpetuating the illusion that technological development can continue in full force in the wake of devastating ecological catastrophe on earth. Jake describes "the world we come from," in the following terms: "there's no green there. They killed their Mother, and they're gonna do the same thing here." Apparently, mass extinction continued until there was not a single tree or bush left. Nevertheless, we find that not only has humanity survived, but also that Capitalism has flourished and is moving on to new conquests across the universe. No doubt, the DJIA hovers quite comfortably in the seven-figure range. Given its initial plot premises, *Avatar* would have delivered a more authentic ecological message if its entire cast of human characters had been non-existent.

But the most powerful ideological message is in the Apotheosis of the Drone. As the Empire moves in for the kill, the Na'vi are reduced to the point of "Only a God can save us," or, perhaps, "Only a God, with the help of its avatar, can save us." On the most overt level, it is, as Brooks and Zizek point out, the latest incarnation of the White Messiah that saves them. On a deeper level, it is, ironically, the Drone, the latest product of the drive for technological domination in the service of Capital, that saves them. This unacceptable solution is in the end negated, as the Drone is transformed into a "real" Na'vi and the human substrate disappears, but this is only magical negation. According to the central narrative, the drone is still a drone, and salvation is achieved through the process of becoming-drone. Thus, the Drone is the final truth of *Avatar.* And it is whatever God it is that lies behind the Drone, not Eywa, that is its true Deity. If we want to define this Deity's nature more precisely, we must say that it is a Triune God. The Three Natures of this Trinity are called Capital, State, and Technique. It is the God whose name cannot be spoken in the film, but Who is present everywhere. This is the real Divinity that is incarnated in the avatar.

Do You Get It?

So how precisely does the fantasy-structure of *Avatar* operate? The film goes one imaginary step beyond even a fundamentally fundamental-fantasy-themed film like *Lost Highway,* in which much of the plot consists of elements of a personal fantasy. In *Avatar,* almost the *entire* film consists of such a fantasy. There are various elements of the real: a protagonist with a real wrecked body; a real dead brother; and a real dying planet. There is also the real of political and economic power, represented by the Corporation, its Army, and its technology. The rest is the clash of fantasies. Jake's dead brother signifies his own dead ideal self, so his opportunity to animate his twin brother's avatar and live through it is a fantasy of resurrection, and ultimately a fantasy of salvation through the power of technology. A fundamental fantasy that is perhaps central to the film's plot is the fantasy that we can save ourselves if we can find and appropriate some X that is somewhere out there. In the current real-world version of that fantasy, the X is, above all, oil. So a useful thought-experiment would be to substitute "oil" for "Unobtainium" in some of the key lines of the film.

Cameron realizes (like a large segment of humanity does, to no effect) that the gratification of this particular fantasy amounts to killing the planet to save it, so within his alternative fantasy world the contradictory quality of conventional fantasy is made ludicrously explicit. The X that will save us is called "Unobtanium." Even when you get it, you don't get it. But strangely, no one in the film seems to get it. It's just left as blatant Romantic irony, and is thus one of the most appealing touches in the film (the tiniest bit of surreality that hints that Cameron and everyone involved in this project might not be totally depraved). The concept of "Unobtainium" is, implicitly, a scathing judgment on a society based on the technofix. The Empire is driven by a desire that cannot possibly be fulfilled. An insane fundamental fantasy based on that desire drives it to destroy anything, including itself, in order to satisfy that desire. This judgment is, of course, contradicted by the film itself as a technologically utopian project, and by its plot elements that involve either explicit or mystified technological liberation. The concept of "Unobtainium" is also a perhaps inadvertent expression of the Lacanian conception of desire, that the very unobtainable nature of the object of desire is basic to the functioning of desire and jouissance. This conception is, however, also contradicted in a big way by the film itself, which culminates in a utopia of full gratification. We might say the substance of the "Mystical

Body" of Eywa is revealed in the end to be "Obtainium." So, in the end, the film ironically affirms precisely the same project that it negates: the solution to the problem of existence is to find and appropriate the X that is somewhere out there, but it turns out to be a spiritual substance, rather than a material one.

Another crucial difference from classic Lynchian fantasy, as expressed most clearly in *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive,* is that despite their momentous social implications, the Lynchian fantasies retain the form of singular fantasies. Though viewers may sympathize with Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*, and perhaps fear elements of this character (the castrated Mad Son) in themselves, it is highly unlikely that anyone would desire to *be* Fred Madison. In *Avatar*, on the other hand, the protagonist's fantasy coincides with the fantasy that the film arouses in the viewer. It also coincides with a shared social fantasy that is reaffirmed by the film, but is inspired continually by the larger fantasy-world, the social imaginary. This is the fantasy in which reality is transformed through gestures rather than true acts. This might be through magical incantation, through acts of heroic will power, or, more mundanely, through voting for Democrats, in short, through anything other than the risk of the engaged act.

In the Beginning: The Logos

As was mentioned, it's always wise to keep an eye out for the purloined letter. And there is another amazing instance in which the letter is shockingly conspicuous, within the film itself. Rather astoundingly, the significance of the film, which is usually kept carefully hidden, is revealed very clearly in the *very first words* of the film. It states what everyone who views the film knows, but which is kept from consciousness by ideology and illusion. First, we begin with the real. Jake says he had "a big hole blown through the middle of [his] life." This expresses his subjective perspective, but it is grounded in objective fact, the course of Empire, the resulting necessity of war, the physical devastation of his body in war. Second, we move to his, and the film's, response to the real through the fantasy of freedom, the imaginary and illusory overcoming of the real. "I started having these dreams. . . . I was free." Third, and finally, we confront the failure of fantasy, the return of the real. "Sooner or later though, you always have to wake up." This has the ring of truth. You *always* have to wake up.

But the film contradicts itself on this very point. It presents us only with the *fantasy* of waking up, and thus helps prevent the viewers from waking up. *Avatar* takes the viewers into a dream world, a world of fantasy, in which one imagines being free, being able to act decisively, being able to defeat evil and transform the world. The protagonist wakes up from the fantasy-world of the Corporation and enters the even more fantastic fantasy-world of the Na'vi. There is no way that the viewers can follow him there. Eventually—specifically, when they leave the theater or turn off the VCR—they have to wake up from this fantasy. However, the deceptive moral and metaphysical injunction expressed at the end of the *Avatar* is that we *don't* have to wake up from the fantasy, that we can go more deeply into it, that it will somehow be transubstantiated into the real. However, this moralism and metaphysics remain enclosed within the narrow walls of a transient fantasy. What is unstated is that when we wake up, from that fantasy, we wake up to another fantasy, the dominant fantasy, the one from which "you don't have to wake up." The one you can, and almost certainly will, go on living.

Every fantasy element of *Avatar* must be reread keeping in mind the dialectic between this dimension, the film's escapist fantasy world, and the dominant fantasy world in which the audience lives its life—and which is reflected more in the world of the Corporation than that of the Na'vi. For example when Jake is in the "link unit," a little outpost of empire that transports him to Na'viland, he observes, "Everything is backwards now. Like out there is the true world, and in here is the dream." However, this poses the real question: For the viewer, which is the most powerful dream, which is the dream that is taken for reality? On the one hand, when Home Tree is bombed, an eminently believable familiar element of the real world intrudes into the film. As Col. Quaritch says, "That's how you scatter the roaches." And this is, indeed, precisely how they scatter the roaches, and any other unfortunate insects that hang around with the roaches. On the other hand, the Na'vi, as the word implies, are the naïve, and their world is a world that is only credible to the naïve, but which is entirely implausible from the standpoint of society's fundamental fantasy, fundamental ideological fiction, fundamental facticity, and fundamental institutional framework. None of the audience can really believe that they could follow Jake's example when he joins the Na'vi, the naïve, except maybe the pre-teen members of the audience, and they will soon give up their innocence and become normally cynical teenagers.

One might ask how a viewer, especially a young male viewer who is part of the prime target audience, might realize the fantasy of flying on a Big Bird like our blue hero Jakesully? Certainly not by joining the long, slow struggle of grassroots eco-defense. *Avatar*'s fantasy world will not inspire them to join the fight against mountain top removal in West Virginia or ancient forest defense in the Pacific Northwest. No, the most promising option is forget the boring idea of defending primeval forests and join the United States Air Force. That's the real way you get to fly the Big Bird (and, incidentally, wear a blue uniform). When one leaves the fantasy world of the theater and returns to the real world of the dominant imaginary, the dominant ideology, the dominant ethos, the dominant institutions, nothing is easier than to forget the ecological and primitivist moralizing and live the more meaningful elements of the fantasy—the parts that play into the dominant fantasy, the reigning social imaginary. Riding flying dinosaurs in Fantasyland is a good theme for a poster to put up in your room. It's not a good career choice.

Military Strategy in Pandorastan

Na'vi military strategy is a joke. Despite Cameron's occasional nods to "the Wisdom of the East," the plot shows that he knows nothing about how tribal peoples and peasants have resisted the state. Laozi expressed it well over two thousand years ago. "'I dare not take the offensive but I take the defensive; I dare not advance an inch but I retreat a foot.' This means: To march without formation, To stretch one's arm without showing it, To confront enemies without seeming to meet them, To hold weapons without seeming to have them."[11] The Na'vi do just the opposite. They confront vastly superior power head-on. They run out of the woods and shoot arrows at military megamachines. And remember, this takes place during a protracted period of conflict with the imperial military machine, so the Na'vi must have known something about the enemy. No wonder they need help from a honky. They're nothing but a honky hallucination of what indigenous people are like. It's said that after valiantly fighting the Spanish conquerors with wooden swords for a while, the Inca warriors sat down on the battlefield and allowed the invaders to hack them to death with their metal swords. They may have lost, but they would not lose as idiots. The Na'vi, on the other hand, fight exactly like idiots. Nevertheless, the plot requires that these idiots must

11. *Daodejing*, Wing-Tsit Chan translation, Ch. 69:1-2.

win, so ultimately we have to become the idiots and swallow the plot. The Corporate Capitalist Military Machine is even more unbelievable. We are to believe that the Empire's military technology has gotten to the point that it can engineer complex humanoid organisms that are remote-controlled so precisely that they can do everything from fight prehistoric monsters to have sex with ten-foot tall blue aliens. We are then to believe that Na'vi arrows are strong enough to go through the heavily reinforced windows of cockpits of planes. We are to believe that its massive high-tech aircraft are so dependent on obsolete technology (and humans who can't shoot) that the aliens can hop on angry versions of Big Bird and actually fly close enough to slaughter the crew with arrows or even blow up the aircraft with hand-grenades. We are to believe that the best army the Corporation can buy has forgotten to order computer-guided missiles and chooses instead to fight off attackers at close range with hand-held machine guns. We are to believe that the satellite imaging somehow doesn't manage to pick up a counter-attack by thousands of rampaging dinosaurs. Satellites are already advanced enough to read license plates. Too bad for the Empire that the dinosaurs didn't have license plates on them.

The whole thing screams "fake."[12] The film's technological message

12. The adoption of one simple interpretative assumption would save Avatar from such ridiculousness. The implicit theme of the film is the triumph of sophisticated technology. Merely interpret the film in a manner that is fully consistent with this theme and the narrative becomes rational and coherent. Pandora is a highly advanced technological utopia in which sophisticated technology pervades every aspect of its world. It is, in fact, stated quite clearly in the film that the whole planet is like one huge, complex computer network. This key bit of information is revealed in the following description of Pandora: "It's a network – a global network…they can upload and download data." We can obviously assume that the Pandorans have perfected military technology and are invincible in war. When they are faced with invasion, one of their technologies—let's call it "the Neuron Bomb"—generates a field of energy that distorts the enemy's perceptions. It causes them to perceive the Pandoran technological environment as pristine, wild nature, the Pandorans as simple savages, and Pandoran weapons as primitive bows and arrows, etc. (The audience is presented with this systematically distorted world but it is assumed that they are too intelligent to take it literally). Thus, the enemy, under the sway of the Empire of Electronic Illusion, completely underestimate the Pandorans and are doomed to defeat. The Pandorans vanquish the Earthling army, as the film recounts, but, given this added layer of meaning, their victory actually makes sense. Jake Sully, the one Earthling who is allowed into Na'vi society, finally discovers the truth behind the illusion. It is revealed to him shortly after the advanced Pandoran neurophysics technology downloads his mind into a

is so powerful and unmistakable that even the dullest viewer will recognize, albeit subconsciously, that in any realistic Avatar-world many technological generations ago the whole fleet would have been turned into remote-controlled drones with computer-guided, precision-targeting weapons. The story would have come to an abrupt end when Jakesully and the whole Na'vi community were blown into oblivion in the first assault by the SuperDrone "Enola Obama."[13] The implicit message of this War of the Worlds is crystal-gazingly clear. Blue-monkey lovers and other dissidents are dead meat. If you want to escape the path of the imperial juggernaut**,** be sure to smoke something very strong, chew a worm, or get bitten by an arachnoid, because that's the only way out.

Meet the Real Hero

Which is why the Drone is the real hero of the film. The Drone reveals the *telos* of superpower military-industrial technology. Human and cybernetic powers are increasingly transferred to the technological instrument at a distance, so that maximum destructive power can be achieved, combined with minimal risk to human and technical resources of the dominating power. In addition, the dominated can be more intensely terrorized while the dominators are rendered less and less vulnerable (though fantasies of vulnerability paradoxically increase as tolerance of risk declines). More rational, technocratic Democrats advanced this development more successfully than the crazier, more heavy-handed, and more overtly bellicose Republicans. Examples are Clinton's strategy of depending heavily on bombing campaigns using high-altitude, nearly invulnerable stealth aircraft, and Obama's geometrical increase over Bush in the use of drones. Avatars are the fantasized full realization of the potentials of this drone technology. The irresistible Power of the Drone is the Message of the Real in *Avatar.*

Of course, according to the surface narrative, magic—the magic of nature—takes over the technology in the end. We see a new twist on

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new body. In other words, he gets the news shortly after the end of the film.

13. A satirical cartoon video on YouTube called "Avatar: How It should Have Ended" depicts the film as ending with the Corporate military finally remembering, just as it blasts off, that it has advanced weapons. It decides to nuke Pandora into oblivion. "Game Over!" The video has about 3.8 million hits so far and has gotten about 14,000 "likes' as opposed to about 2,000 "dislikes."

the *Deus ex machina* trick. Instead of the God arriving in the machine, the Goddess, Eywa, goes into the machine, the Avatar/Drone. Then presto, it's no longer a machine, or at least we're supposed to forget that it's a machine. Ultimately, this is the escapist fantasy message of *Avatar*. Forsake our nature, forsake the earth. It's lost and we're lost. The only refuge is a fantasy world in which we escape from our bodies and from our world. However, the fantasy message fades to the degree we face the Message of the Real (as we, that is, the non-psychotics among us, must). We all know that the technology is real and the fantasy is a total fake.

Avatar is not the only recent film to that revolves around the future of drone technology. This theme is explored brilliantly in the Mexican film *Sleep Dealer*, a neglected masterpiece of techno-dystopian cinema. In it, we see a world in which technologies have been invented to allow workers to perform virtual labor at distant sites. First, the workers have terminals implanted in their bodies, after which they can be hooked up to advanced cybernetic systems to do virtual/real labor. The workers go through the motions of labor in dismal warehouses in Mexican border towns, while the actual labor is carried out by remote-controlled robots in L.A., Phoenix, Denver, etc. It's a dream come true for racist, imperialistic capitalism. The Empire can import not only the products of cheap Mexican labor, but also the cheap labor itself, without having a single Mexican set foot on American soil. The film also brings in more traditional drone technology, since economic domination is enforced by remote-controlled bombers. Its real brilliance is to reveal prophetically a future in which military drone technology is combined with a system of drone production. What *Sleep Dealer* presents in a clear and devastatingly critical way, *Avatar* presents in a thoroughly mystified, deceptive, and ideological form. The future world is a world of domination by the Drone. If we fight against this domination, we may win or we may lose. But in order to fight against it, we need to recognize clearly, on the material, ideological, imaginary, and practical levels, the precise nature of the enemy. *Avatar* does everything it can to create obstacles to such consciousness.

Please Close Your Mind on the Way Out

So, what have we learned from *Avatar* about how to resist the Empire? Apparently, that you're in good shape if you're skilled at doing magic and riding prehistoric monsters. Unfortunately, there are no prehistoric

monsters around, and magic, though it has its place in any decent culture, has already been tried as a military strategy. There were attempts In the 60's to levitate the Pentagon, and, while some people had fun trying, it just didn't work. Science is already making us post-human, and as *Avatar* tells us, if you can just find a magic tree, you get to be *post*-post-human. But, of course, you won't find that elusive tree, and you won't do the double negation trick. When, at the end of the film, "the aliens" go "back to their dying world," we find another point at which *Avatar* tells us the brutal truth, albeit on a slightly metaphorical level. For this is precisely where the earthlings go when they exit the theater, leaving the fantasy world of Pandora far behind them.

Le Chaos, ou l'Origine du Monde, *The Temple of Muses Bernard Picart, (1673-1733)*